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ABSTRACT

This document is the seventh in a series of 12 early childhood program descriptions compiled by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development. The program described here is the East Harlem Block Schools in New York City. The Block Schools include two day care centers, an elementary school, and a tutoring program, whose total ethnic population reflects that of the surrounding community -- 70% Puerto Rican, 20% black, and 10% white. Most of the children are bilingual and all are from low-income families. The schools were established by parents who felt it necessary to design and control the educational environment in order to create continuity in attitudes and relationships between home and school. Staff and teachers were then hired who were responsive to these goals and accountable to parents. Included in the program description are brief outlines of: (1) goals and objectives, (2) content and materials, (3) classroom activities, (4) parent involvement, (5) professional and paraprofessional training, (6) administrative requirements and costs, (7) program development and evaluation, and (8) program history and present (1971) status. (JMB)

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Early Childhood
Information Unit
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Program Summary

EAST HARLEM BLOCK SCHOOLS

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New York, New York 10029

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GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

The East Harlem Block Schools in New York City include two day care centers serving 105 children, an elementary school enrolling 100 children in grades one, two, three, four, and five, and a tutoring program involving 150 children. The developers plan to add one grade each year to the elementary school, extending it eventually to grade eight.

The East Harlem Block Schools were designed by parents to serve children of preschool and primary school ages. The ethnic population of the schools reflects that of the surrounding community--70% Puerto Rican, 20% black, and 10% white. Most of the children are bilingual and all are from low-income families.

The schools were established by parents who felt that in order for their children to receive a good education it was imperative that they, the parents, design and control the educational environment. It was felt that schools established and run by parents would create "continuity in attitudes and relationships between home and school." They saw the necessity for setting educational goals for their children and hiring staff and teachers who were responsive to these goals and accountable to the parents.

The educational goals set by parents were intentionally broad because the project was conceived of as an institutional rather than a curriculum reform. The concerns were that the children make "clear and definite progress in reading, writing, and math; and (that teachers) encourage and work individually with those children who seemed to have no interest or little ability in academic work." In addition to academic progress, the program is also designed with the intention that children develop certain attitudes about themselves. The parents "want the children to learn to trust themselves . . . to have the sense that problems can be worked out through the use of their own intelligence . . . to learn to be responsible for their own behavior, to respect themselves and other people, to be curious and confident about the world."

CONTENT AND MATERIALS:

There are no prescribed curricula for the East Harlem Block Schools. Curriculum development is a continual process. The teachers develop their own instructional units, teaching materials, and methods of evaluation with help from staff, parents, and children.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

Students are encouraged to make inquiries and discoveries on their own. Many activities of the school center around students' active participation in real life situations. For example, students learn about units of measurement when they are engaged in a woodworking project.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT:

The parents form the backbone of the administration of the East Harlem Block Schools. "The Board of Directors consists only of parents of children enrolled in the schools; parents have . . . final control over all policy, finances, and personnel decisions." Over half of the full-time staff are parents and community people, many of whom were formerly on welfare.

Parents are intimately involved with the daily activities at the schools. Parent-teachers are regarded as on equal footing with professional teachers. All staff meetings include parents and all decisions are made with their full participation.

PROFESSIONAL AND PARAPROFESSIONAL TRAINING:

Both teachers and parent aides are exposed to the same preservice and inservice training procedures, including the following:

1. Curriculum workshops and discussions of educational policies during a two-week orientation period in September.

2. Workshops at other agencies attended on a voluntary basis.

3. Day-long staff meetings scheduled once a month for meeting with consultants.

4. Visits to other schools.

5. On-going supervision from education directors.

There is also a high school equivalency and college preparatory course for paraprofessionals.

ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS AND COSTS:

For a class of 20 students in the day care centers there are one professional teacher and two parent teachers who usually speak both English and Spanish. For a class of 20 children in the elementary school there are one teacher and one parent co-teacher. No special equipment or facilities are needed.

The day care centers cost approximately $2,000 per child per year. (This is somewhat lower than the average annual per child cost in New York City.)

The basic cost per child per year in the elementary school is $1,100--also slightly less than the public school cost.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION:

The British Infant Schools, John Holt, and especially Caleb Gattegno and William Glasser have influenced the schools. The staff has considerable training in Gattegno's institutes. The resulting philosophy of the schools combines "an emphasis on intellectual development with an awareness of individual children's needs."

No specific evaluation data is available. A report by the executive director of the East Harlem Block Schools to the Carnegie Foundation in January 1970 cited individual cases of marked academic improvement among children who had been failing when enrolled in public and parochial schools. The developers believe that any significant evaluation should examine the importance of the students' sense of belonging, the changes in the lives of families, and the strengthening of community cohesiveness. They also believe that the positive feelings which they state their students have toward school should be evaluated for their implications.

PROGRAM HISTORY AND PRESENT DEVELOPMENT:

The idea for the East Harlem Block Schools was conceived in 1965 when a group of parents became concerned over the quality of education their children were receiving and decided that it was up to them to do something to change it. They obtained a grant from the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity to establish a "bi-cultural, community-controlled nursery school program which would employ and train a maximum number of community people and . . . serve low-income families in a selected area." The nursery opened in a storefront in September of 1965 with 30 neighborhood children of preschool age and two carefully chosen teachers. In September of 1968, because of cutbacks in OEO funds, the nurseries, which had grown considerably, applied for funds and became the first parent-controlled day care centers funded by the City of New York.

Because the parents became anxious about having their children leave the nursery school only to enroll in a public school first grade, they established a day school for the elementary years. In September of 1967 a first grade class was started. A second grade was added in 1968, a third grade in 1969, a fourth grade in 1970, and a fifth grade in 1971. They expect to add a grade a year until the school provides for grades one through eight.

Anthony Ward was the first executive director of the East Harlem Block Schools. He was succeeded by Dorothy Stoneman. Judith Macaulay is now executive director.

The East Harlem Tutoring Project, formerly run by the Friends Service Committee, was incorporated into the East Harlem Block Schools in 1967.

Presently the East Harlem Block Schools consists of three projects: the Nurseries, the Day School, and the Tutoring Project.

As an institutional model, the East Harlem Block Schools has helped two other schools (in Greeley, Colorado and Rough Rock, Arizona) to establish parent-controlled educational environments. The former director states:

> The Block Schools are visited approximately weekly by community groups interested in following the example of starting parent-controlled day care centers or schools. Parent-controlled day care centers are growing all over New York--the Block Schools were the first and are the largest, and as such have been included on several policy making commissions for New York City, including the Mayor's Task Force for Child Development. They are now participating in another official Task Force to develop new guidelines for staffing patterns and credentialling in New York's early childhood program.